

**IN THE UNITED STATES DISTRICT COURT
FOR THE WESTERN DISTRICT OF NORTH CAROLINA
STATESVILLE DIVISION
CIVIL NO. 5:16CV186-DSC**

JUDITH MARIE HOLSCLAW,)
Plaintiff,)
)
)
vs.) MEMORANDUM AND ORDER
) OF REMAND
NANCY A. BERRYHILL,¹)
Commissioner of Social)
Security Administration,)
Defendant.)
)

THIS MATTER is before the Court on Plaintiff's "Motion for Summary Judgment" (document #14) and Defendant's "Motion for Judgment on the Pleadings" (document #15), as well as the parties' briefs and exhibits.

The parties have consented to Magistrate Judge jurisdiction pursuant to 28 U.S.C. § 636(c) and these Motions are now ripe for disposition.

Having considered the written arguments, administrative record, and applicable authority, the Court finds that Defendant's decision to deny Plaintiff Disability Insurance Benefits ("DIB") is not supported by substantial evidence. Accordingly, the Court will grant Plaintiff's Motion for Summary Judgment; deny Defendant's Motion for Judgment on the Pleadings; reverse the Commissioner's decision; and remand this matter for further proceedings consistent with this Memorandum and Order.

¹Nancy A. Berryhill is now the Acting Commissioner of Social Security. Pursuant to Rule 25(d) of the Federal Rules of Civil Procedure, Nancy A. Berryhill is substituted for Carolyn W. Colvin as the Defendant herein. No further action is necessary pursuant to section 205(g) of the Social Security Act, 42 U.S.C. § 405(g).

I. PROCEDURAL HISTORY

The procedural history is not in dispute. The Court adopts the procedural history as stated in the parties' briefs.

Plaintiff filed the present action on October 12, 2016. She assigns error to the Administrative Law Judge (ALJ)'s treatment of the consultative opinion from John H. Bevis, M.A., LPA, a licensed psychological associate, and to the ALJ's formulation of her mental Residual Functional Capacity ("RFC").² See Plaintiff's "Memorandum ..." at 3-5 (document #14-1).

The parties' cross-Motions are ripe for disposition.

II. STANDARD OF REVIEW

The Social Security Act, 42 U.S.C. § 405(g) and § 1383(c)(3), limits this Court's review of a final decision of the Commissioner to: (1) whether substantial evidence supports the Commissioner's decision, Richardson v. Perales, 402 U.S. 389, 390, 401 (1971); and (2) whether the Commissioner applied the correct legal standards. Hays v. Sullivan, 907 F.2d 1453, 1456 (4th Cir. 1990); see also Hunter v. Sullivan, 993 F.2d 31, 34 (4th Cir. 1992) (per curiam). The District Court does not review a final decision of the Commissioner de novo. Smith v. Schweiker, 795 F.2d 343, 345 (4th Cir. 1986); King v. Califano, 599 F.2d 597, 599 (4th Cir. 1979); Blalock v. Richardson, 483 F.2d 773, 775 (4th Cir. 1972).

As the Social Security Act provides, "[t]he findings of the [Commissioner] as to any fact, if supported by substantial evidence, shall be conclusive." 42 U.S.C. § 405(g). In Smith v.

²The Social Security Regulations define "Residual Functional Capacity" as "what [a claimant] can still do despite his limitations." 20 C.F.R. § 404.1545(a). The Commissioner is required to "first assess the nature and extent of [the claimant's] physical limitations and then determine [the claimant's] Residual Functional Capacity for work activity on a regular and continuing basis." 20 C.F.R. § 404.1545(b).

Heckler, 782 F.2d 1176, 1179 (4th Cir. 1986), quoting Richardson v. Perales, 402 U.S. 389, 401 (1971), the Fourth Circuit defined “substantial evidence” thus:

Substantial evidence has been defined as being “more than a scintilla and do[ing] more than creat[ing] a suspicion of the existence of a fact to be established. It means such relevant evidence as a reasonable mind might accept as adequate to support a conclusion.”

See also Seacrist v. Weinberger, 538 F.2d 1054, 1056-57 (4th Cir. 1976) (“We note that it is the responsibility of the [Commissioner] and not the courts to reconcile inconsistencies in the medical evidence”).

The Fourth Circuit has long emphasized that it is not for a reviewing court to weigh the evidence again, nor to substitute its judgment for that of the Commissioner, assuming the Commissioner’s final decision is supported by substantial evidence. Hays v. Sullivan, 907 F.2d at 1456 (4th Cir. 1990); see also Smith v. Schweiker, 795 F.2d at 345; and Blalock v. Richardson, 483 F.2d at 775. Indeed, this is true even if the reviewing court disagrees with the outcome – so long as there is “substantial evidence” in the record to support the final decision below. Lester v. Schweiker, 683 F.2d 838, 841 (4th Cir. 1982).

III. DISCUSSION OF CLAIM

The question before the ALJ was whether Plaintiff became disabled at any time through her date last insured of September 20, 2014.³ Plaintiff challenges the ALJ’s determination of

³Under the Social Security Act, 42 U.S.C. § 301, et seq., the term “disability” is defined as an:

inability to engage in any substantial gainful activity by reason of any medically determinable physical or mental impairment which can be expected to result in death or which has lasted or can be expected to last for a continuous period of not less than 12 months
Pass v. Chater, 65 F.3d 1200, 1203 (4th Cir. 1995).

her RFC. The ALJ is solely responsible for assessing a claimant's RFC. 20 C.F.R. §§ 404.1546(c) & 416.946(c). In making that assessment, the ALJ must consider the functional limitations resulting from the claimant's medically determinable impairments. SSR96-8p, available at 1996 WL 374184, at *2. The ALJ must also "include a narrative discussion describing how the evidence supports each conclusion, citing specific medical facts . . . and nonmedical evidence." Id.

Plaintiff has the burden of establishing her RFC by showing how her impairments affect her functioning. See 20 C.F.R. §§404.1512(c) & 416.912(c); see also, e.g., Stormo v. Barnhart, 377 F.3d 801, 806 (8th Cir. 2004) ("[t]he burden of persuasion . . . to demonstrate RFC remains on the claimant, even when the burden of production shifts to the Commissioner at step five"); Plummer v. Astrue, No. 5:11-cv-06-RLV-DSC, 2011 WL 7938431, at *5 (W.D.N.C. Sept. 26, 2011) (Memorandum and Recommendation) ("[t]he claimant bears the burden of providing evidence establishing the degree to which her impairments limit her RFC") (citing Stormo), adopted, 2012 WL 1858844 (May 22, 2102), aff'd, 487 F. App'x 795 (4th Cir. Nov. 6, 2012).

In Mascio v. Colvin, 780 F.3d 632 (4th Cir. 2015), the Fourth Circuit held that "remand may be appropriate . . . where an ALJ fails to assess a claimant's capacity to perform relevant functions, despite contradictory evidence in the record, or where other inadequacies in the ALJ's analysis frustrate meaningful review." 780 F.3d at 636 (quoting Cichocki v. Astrue, 729 F.3d 172, 177 (2d Cir. 2013)). This explicit function-by-function analysis is not necessary when functions are irrelevant or uncontested.

Applying those legal principles to the record here, the Court concludes that this matter must be remanded for a new hearing. In formulating Plaintiff's RFC, the ALJ stated that she gave

“significant weight” to Mr. Bevis’ opinion that Plaintiff “will likely experience significant problems relating to fellow workers and supervisors on a day-to-day basis due to her severe anxiety and mood swings. She will experience significant problems tolerating ongoing stressors, pressures and demands associated with gainful employment.” (Tr. 536). Then without providing any further explanation, the ALJ found that Plaintiff’s limitation in interacting with supervisors was less severe than her ability to interact with co-workers and the public. The ALJ found that Plaintiff had the RFC for a full range of work at all exertional levels, but with non-exertional limitations of “simple routine repetitive tasks with few if any workplace changes, rare (less than 1/3 of the day), interaction with co-workers and the general public, but with occasional interaction with supervisors, as well as no fast paced production work.” (Tr. 99). “Occasional” interaction is defined as one-third to two-thirds of a day. The V.E. testified that if Plaintiff’s interaction with supervisors was limited to “rare,” there would be no jobs that she could perform. (Tr. 147). Accordingly, the error is not harmless.

The Fourth Circuit recently addressed a similar situation:

We do not take a position on the merits of [Plaintiff’s] application for disability benefits. Instead, the dispute here arises from a problem that has become all too common among administrative decisions challenged in this court--a problem decision makers could avoid by following the admonition they have no doubt heard since their grade-school math classes: Show your work. The ALJ did not do so here, and this error rendered h[er] decision unreviewable.

Patterson v. Comm’r of Social Security, 846 F.3d 656, 663 (4th Cir. 2017).

As stated in Mascio, “[p]erhaps the ALJ can explain why [Plaintiff’s ability to interact with supervisors was less impaired than her ability to interact with co-workers and the public] But because the ALJ gave no explanation, a remand is in order.” 780 F.3d at 636.

IV. ORDER

NOW THEREFORE IT IS ORDERED:

1. Plaintiff's "Motion for Summary Judgment" (document #14) is **GRANTED**; Defendant's "Motion for Judgment on the Pleadings" (document #15) is **DENIED**; and the Commissioner's decision is **REVERSED**. This matter is **REMANDED** for a new hearing pursuant to Sentence Four of 42 U.S.C. § 405(g).⁴
2. The Clerk is directed to send copies of this Memorandum and Order to counsel for the parties.

SO ORDERED.

Signed: June 14, 2017



David S. Cayer
United States Magistrate Judge 

⁴Sentence Four authorizes "a judgment affirming, modifying, or reversing the decision ... with or without remanding the cause for a rehearing." Sullivan v. Finkelstein, 496 U.S. 617, 625 (1990).